AN AGENDA FOR
EUROPE-GULF DEFENCE COOPERATION

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Introduction

Whereas US-Gulf military cooperation has been the topic of abundant literature, the role of Europe in supporting the armed forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) member states has attracted limited attention. The notable exception is the case of the UK, but the scholarship on British policy towards the region generally looks at its past rather than at more recent developments. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing evidence of the density of military exchanges between Europe and the Gulf and by discussing the current challenges and opportunities in deepening these ties.

When compared to the US, European engagement with the Gulf is a complex enterprise, involving states (in particular the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain) and intergovernmental organisations (EU, NATO), with each using its own cooperation framework. In other words, European engagement with Gulf countries was not designed in a comprehensive manner and only reflects the multiple, sometimes redundant, initiatives launched by both sides. This paper refers to Europe as the region that includes the current 27 member states of the EU plus the United Kingdom. Turkey is excluded from that geographical definition, but the engagement of NATO, where Turkey is a member state, with the Arabian Peninsula is considered as representing a component of Europe-Gulf exchanges.

The initiatives forming the landscape of European-Gulf defence cooperation can be divided into three pillars that will guide us here: military training and education, including courses and exercises at the tactical, operational and strategic levels; industrial cooperation, the coordination between defence companies, procurement agencies and the armed forces through the process of arms acquisition; and finally, strategic consultations, understood as an institutionalised mechanism of discussions at the highest level to facilitate continuing exchange between both sides on common security issues.

Against that backdrop, this paper first provides an assessment of the current state of Europe-Gulf defence cooperation, looking specifically at both the bilateral and the multilateral levels. Based on this appraisal, the second section discusses how to improve the first two pillars of the engagement between both regions: the European contribution to Gulf military training programmes and then the potential for European-Gulf industrial cooperation in the context of the growth of local defence industries. Finally, the third section explores the ways in which Europe-Gulf defence cooperation could move to a new level by establishing a multilateral, strategic dialogue on regional issues of common interest, such as maritime security, stability in the Sahel, and security assistance to Lebanon and Iraq.
1. Assessing the state of Europe-Gulf defence relations

Because Europe is not a unified strategic actor militarily in the same way that the US is, assessing its engagement with the Gulf consists of both the bilateral track – how specific European countries engage with the GCC states, and the multilateral track – how NATO and the EU have built their own relations with the Gulf. Bilateral relations have historically prevailed in European-Gulf military exchanges. The assessment here underlines a steady rise in the level of interaction between NATO, the EU and their Gulf partners in more recent years.

1.1. The density of bilateral military exchanges

European-Gulf defence cooperation remains deeply anchored in bilateral ties built between both sides and in particular with two European countries - the UK and France. While other countries such as Italy, Spain and Germany are militarily engaged with the Gulf – either through arms sales or occasional military training activities – only the UK and France cover comprehensively the three pillars of military cooperation (training, industrial cooperation and strategic dialogue).

Both the UK and France describe the Gulf as an area of strategic interest. France’s latest White Paper on Defense & National Security in 2013 argued that “the Arabo-Persian Gulf has particular strategic importance: its stability is a major challenge not only for France and all the European countries, but also for the United States and the big emerging powers”. Likewise, the UK’s 2015 Strategic and Defence and Security Review described the GCC member states as “vital partners for the UK […] in addressing direct threats to the UK from terrorism, extremism, and organised crime”.

British officials have also turned the “Brexit” decision into a narrative according to which leaving the EU would enable London to re-emphasise its partnerships abroad – the idea of “Global Britain” – and in particular in the Gulf. In December 2016 Boris Johnson, the then-UK Foreign Secretary, asserted in a speech at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain that “Britain is back East of Suez, not as the greatest military power on earth (…) but as a nation that is active in and deeply committed to the region.”

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At the operational level the priority allocated to the Gulf in the security strategies of both European countries translated first into the signing of defence agreements. These agreements provide a legal and political framework for the deployment of European soldiers to GCC states while identifying the priorities assigned to operational cooperation and the mechanisms of strategic consultations. The UK signed defence partnerships with the UAE, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. It also signed a new Military and Security Cooperation Agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2017. Meanwhile, France has signed similar agreements with Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE and is committed to a defence cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia. The content of these documents remains classified, but it is generally assumed that in addition to military training initiatives they include security guarantees.

Within the framework of these documents, the military presence of France and the UK has been growing in the last decade. Overall, the UK is the most visible European military power in the Gulf, with forces permanently stationed in all GCC countries except for Saudi Arabia. In 2018, the Royal Navy reopened a facility in Bahrain with about 200 personnel stationed there. That same year the British and Omani authorities announced the establishment of a new joint training base inside the Sultanate, followed by the deployment of 90 British soldiers. This initiative builds on the long history of British support to the Omani military education system. In Kuwait, 50 British troops contribute to the command structure of Operation Inherent Resolve in Oman and Bahrain. Finally, about 200 British troops are also deployed in the UAE.

More recent than the British military presence, the French one is also slightly smaller and is anchored in one country: the UAE. In 2009, following a revision of the France-UAE bilateral defence agreement, the French government announced the construction of a new military base in Abu Dhabi – the first new French military post abroad since the presidency of Charles De Gaulle. About 650 French troops are permanently stationed in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, operating on three main sites: the Al Dafrah air base, an army unit at Zayed Military City that focuses on desert warfare and the naval base in Mina Zayed. Notably, the Commander of the French Forces in the UAE, nicknamed “Alindien” is not only in charge of bilateral cooperation but of all French operations in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean.

By stationing armed forces in the Arabian Peninsula, European governments have built military ties that focus on training and education programmes. For instance, the UK has played a historical role in training the Saudi National Guard since the 1960s and it has recently been an active contributor to the reform of the Saudi Ministry of Defense, in particular the creation of a Saudi Joint Forces Command said to be inspired by its British equivalent. For three years, the UK also provided academic support to the Qatari Joint Command and Staff College, with a small faculty body dispatched from King’s College London. Meanwhile, French support training in the Gulf is more occasional and reflects its closer ties with the UAE. For instance, in 2019 the French Navy offered a 2-week course on maritime security to Emirati officers, with the aim not only to make it a regular programme of Emirati naval education but also a course offered to other GCC navies.

In addition to these activities in the region, France and the UK – to a lesser extent Germany or Italy – host Gulf officers in their national war colleges. Above all the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst in the UK remains a central reference, as several generations of Gulf rulers have graduated from the Academy.

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6 In the French military jargon, the term “Alindien” designates the Admiral commanding the forces of the maritime zone of the Indian Ocean.
Regarding the second pillar of military cooperation – arms sales – European defence industries remain a major source of imports for the Gulf’s armed forces, despite the prevailing share of the market by American companies. Over the 2017-2021 period, the UK, Spain, Italy, Germany and France altogether provided around 32% of the arms imports to the Gulf countries.\(^9\) For France, the biggest European arms exporter, the GCC market represented 33% of all orders during the 2010-2020 decade. Of these total orders for the French defence industry, Qatar and Saudi Arabia each amounted to 11\(^\circ\).\(^{10}\) European platforms are an integral part of the Gulf’s military landscape: the UAE Army uses France’s Leclerc tanks and its Air Force is equipped with three squadrons of Mirage 2000-9 DAD; the Saudi Air Force includes three Typhoon squadrons, the Oman Air Force operates one Eurofighter Typhoon squadron while Qatar has ordered 24 of these same fighters; Qatar also relies on nine Mirage 2000D and a Rafale squadron.

Given the importance of the Gulf destination for European military exports, the economic and diplomatic relations between both regions have implications for the financial stability of European companies. It is worth noting that the British company, BAE Systems, sells about one-sixth of its orders to Saudi Arabia and therefore is exposed to any change in the defence expenditures of the Kingdom.\(^{11}\)

While European defence companies remain major players in the Gulf, their presence is also marked by a fierce intra-European competition that in some cases can be detrimental to the Gulf countries. The fact that the Qatari Air Force operates fighter jets with American, British and French origins may indicate the political desire of Doha to balance its cooperation between its main Western partners, but it also constitutes a major logistical challenge with regard to the training of pilots on different systems. Furthermore, it creates limitations in terms of interoperability within the same air force.\(^{12}\)

Finally, with the third pillar, strategic dialogue, bilateral exchanges between Gulf and European partners have gone beyond the sole objective of supporting Gulf security and now include potentially common responses to regional crises. Maritime security is a good illustration of that trend. The UK currently leads the coalition task

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force Sentinel, operating from Bahrain, while France played a central role in creating a European mission for maritime surveillance in the Strait of Hormuz – codenamed Operation Agénor – operating from the UAE. The latter reached its full operational capability last February, with two frigates and military personnel from several European allies (Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Portugal). Sentinel and Agénor were designed to prevent maritime clashes following the attacks on tankers in the Strait in the spring of 2019. Both operations also reflect one contentious aspect of Europe-Gulf bilateral engagements: the lack of coordination. These initiatives indicate common priorities in the defence policies for all sides, but the lack of coordination among them pits into question the risk of redundancies and wasted resources. This evidences the need for a broader framework to conduct a strategic dialogue among European and Gulf partners, which is explored in more detail in the last section of this paper.

1.2. A steady growth of multilateral engagements

Both NATO and the EU have developed their own defence ties with the Gulf states, although the scope of these relations is not as comprehensive as the ones established by France and the UK. These limitations reflect the constraints under which both intergovernmental organisations operate. NATO is primarily a military entity whose strategic priorities are defined by its member states, rather than by its own permanent structures, while the EU traditionally favours a non-military approach to its international engagements which logically limits expectations of EU-Gulf defence cooperation.

NATO’s engagement with the Arabian Peninsula officially started with the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) in 2004. This partnership included four of the GCC members: the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. Its initial focus was cooperation at the operational level, in particular through military training and educational activities. This emphasis was the result of a diplomatic compromise. Back in 2004 NATO officials favoured a bottom-up approach that would first strengthen military-to-military exchanges before moving on to the broader political discussions. This approach can be explained by the mixed results of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue that was initiated in 1994 to promote strategic consultations between NATO, six Arab countries and Israel. It is also worth remembering that the ICI was originally meant to be a provisional compromise. In the early 2000s, NATO’s Secretariat General aimed to formalise a partnership with the GCC itself. However, in light of the cautious responses received from the region, NATO opted for a framework with four of the GCC member states that expressed a desire to cooperate. This underlines another limitation of the ICI with the formal absence of both Saudi Arabia and Oman. Both states refrained from joining the partnership. Although the governments in Riyadh and Muscat did not publicly explain their reasoning, it is widely believed that Oman refrained from adhering to the ICI out of a fear that this would antagonise the Iranian regime and undermine its traditionally neutral policy regarding Western competition with Tehran. Meanwhile, the leadership of Saudi Arabia has seemed to favour a bilateral relationship that is tailored to its particular strategic role in the Gulf and is not one that would put it on a par with four of its neighbouring small states. This did not prevent NATO’s representatives in Brussels from regularly expressing their hopes for Saudi membership to the ICI. In fact, the Saudi Armed Forces participate in numerous activities with NATO and send a significant number of its officers to training programmes at the NATO School in Germany and the NATO Defense College in Italy. But paradoxically it can be argued that the more

15 Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia; For a detailed background, see the memoirs of former NATO deputy Secretary general Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, Un viaggio politico senza mappe. Fra diversita e futuro nel grande Medio Oriente, Rome, Rubertino, 2013.
16 Author interview with a former NATO deputy secretary general, April 2016.
that Saudi officers engage with NATO on this ad-hoc basis the less keen its government will be to formalise this engagement through formal participation in the ICI.

In the sixteen years since its establishment, the ICI has been instrumental as one of the pillars of Europe-Gulf military cooperation: the training and education component. Each of the four countries opened diplomatic missions to NATO in Brussels. In addition, ICI members convened workshops and conferences in their capitals gathering NATO high representatives and the ambassadors of NATO countries.17 This led to increased Gulf participation in the regular activities organised by NATO commands such as the Joint Forces Command in Naples, Italy, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium, and the Allied Command for Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia. The extent of these exchanges is most visible at the training and education level, with Gulf officers regularly attending the courses offered by the NATO School in Germany and the NATO Defense College in Italy.18 Starting in 2018, Kuwait also contributed to the activities of the NATO Defense College by seconding one officer as an academic advisor to the organisation.

To date the most significant achievement of the ICI was the opening in 2017 in Kuwait of a NATO-ICI Regional Centre – an entity that NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg called the “new home for the Alliance in the Gulf”.19 Hosted by the National Security Bureau of the Kuwaiti government, the centre has been gathering NATO and Gulf officers for training courses that look specifically at areas of common interest: maritime security, energy infrastructure security, cybersecurity and defence against CRBN threats. In the 2017-2020 period, the centre had already delivered 40 short-term programmes attended by about 1000 participants from the GCC countries.20 Admittedly, this NATO presence in Kuwait in itself is extremely modest: only two representatives from the Brussels Headquarters are deployed to the centre and the courses are taught by NATO “mobile teams” dispatched for a short period from various commands in Europe and the US.

NATO-Gulf engagement should be assessed in light of realistic expectations. If some of NATO member states (the US, UK, France, and Italy, in particular) consider the Arabian Peninsula as a strategic priority, others see it as a distraction from the core mission of the Alliance: defending its eastern flank against the perceived Russian threat. As a result, NATO representatives refrain from expressing a position on key Gulf security issues such as Iran’s regional policy. Likewise, NATO’s current Strategic Concept, now dating from 2010, does not mention the region at all.

Notwithstanding these limitations, ICI activities have been successful in creating new international networks of European and Gulf military leaders. Courses and workshops have created processes and routines for both sides to engage in on a regular basis. This has allowed NATO to play the role of “agent of socialization” in the same way that Alexandra Gheciu depicted NATO’s outreach to East Europe in the nineties.21 According to NATO decision-makers, this “socialization” aspect definitely helped the coordination of NATO forces with Qatari and Emirati counterparts when the latter joined the 2011 operation in Libya.22

To a certain extent, the nature of the Gulf-EU relationship is the reverse in comparison to Gulf-NATO relations. The Gulf military exchanges with NATO mostly occur in the operational

18 There is no detailed data available on the exact number of officers and their nationalities that participated to these programmes.
22 Phone interview with NATO military officer, March 2020.
domain, relations with the EU have been limited to the level of strategic consultations. In fact, strategic consultations is the only pillar of military cooperation where the EU has been engaging with Gulf partners.

It is worth noting that while NATO’s official documents do not discuss the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf region and the GCC are mentioned in the EU’s Global Strategy of 2016. The document states that the organisation will deepen its dialogue with the GCC and its member states “on regional conflicts, human rights and counter-terrorism, seeking to prevent contagion of existing crises and foster the space for cooperation and diplomacy”. The Strategy calls for “fostering triangular relations across the Red Sea between Europe, the Horn and the Gulf to face shared security challenges and economic opportunities”, a statement that clearly identifies common interests between the EU and Gulf partners in maritime security efforts in the Horn of Africa.23

To support these goals the EU-Gulf partnership relies on a cooperation agreement signed in 1988 by the GCC and the then European Economic Community. This document identified economic cooperation as its primary goal, with defence issues scarcely mentioned in the expression of common aspirations for “peace and stability in the region”.24 The institutionalisation of EU-Gulf diplomatic relations followed with the opening in 2004 of an office of the European Commission for the Gulf region, based in Riyadh. Its role was later strengthened by the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS provides the EU with a stronger diplomatic instrument for promoting its agenda and the overseas delegations that represent the EU are led by an accredited Ambassador. While the delegation in Riyadh covers Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia, two other delegations were opened in the region - in the UAE in 2013 and in Kuwait in 2018, this last one being also responsible for relations with Qatar.25

These permanent EU delegations in the region allow for a closer strategic dialogue than the measures conducted by NATO structures based in Europe or the US. For

ICI activities have been successful in creating new international networks of European and Gulf military leaders.
instance, European officials at the EU Delegations in the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been using this framework to coordinate the efforts between the EU and the Gulf countries in the field of maritime security in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. As evidenced by the EU’s Global Strategy, the topic has been high on the agenda in Brussels, especially in the context of the ongoing discussions for the renewal of the mandate for Operation Atalanta. Initiated in 2008, Operation Atalanta has been operating under a mandate that was last renewed in July 2018, to last until December 2020. At the time of writing, there was no confirmation on the type of cooperation that could be designed between the EU and Gulf navies in the Horn, but according to informal exchanges with EU officials there have been suggestions that the mandate of Operation Atalanta could be geographically extended. It could also include the formalisation of exchanges with the Red Sea Forum, a new regional initiative promoted by Saudi Arabia.26

Despite clear common areas of interest and the robust diplomatic framework of the EU in the Gulf, there is no formal military cooperation between EU institutions and the Gulf States. Asked about examples of cooperation, EU diplomats usually refer to non-military initiatives. For instance, in 2014 the EU established an EU Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Centre of Excellence in Abu Dhabi. The centre is part of a broader initiative launched in 2010 to provide countries outside the EU with technical assistance in CBRN risk mitigation.27 The structure in Abu Dhabi operates as the Regional Secretariat for the GCC and is a fairly small organisation with limited technical expertise. The EU is also cooperating with the Abu Dhabi based International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism – Hedayah, where the focus is on non-military responses to countering violent extremism. In that context, the EU has been funding a de-radicalisation programme, but such cases remain outside the scope of military cooperation.28

This modest cooperation is partly due to the limitations of the EU Military Committee (EUMC) itself. Contrary to its NATO equivalent, the EUMC does not conduct a programme of military-to-military cooperation with EU-Gulf partners. This means that the strategic dialogue between political leaders and diplomats on both sides is not operational at the level of the armed forces. In addition to these institutional constraints the limited visibility of the EU in Gulf military discussions also relates to a common misperception in the Peninsula about the EU, as it is seen primarily as an inward-looking, free trade zone. When asked about the lack of military cooperation an EU diplomat lamented, “The EU is primarily seen as a facilitator to access European markets.”29

All in all, the mix of bilateral and multilateral engagements mentioned above underline the extent of exchanges between Europe and the Gulf at the strategic level. There are for sure obstacles and limitations to these partnerships, be it for the lack of coordination at the bilateral level or the institutional constraints under which NATO or the EU conduct their own policies. Taking stock of these challenges, the following two sections address the challenge of strengthening the overall cohesion of Europe-Gulf military exchanges.

29 Author interview, Abu Dhabi, Fall 2018.
2. Consolidating the training and industrial pillars of Europe-Gulf defence cooperation

As evidenced by the previous section, Europe remains, as a whole, a close partner of the Gulf’s armed forces. In this context, the primary challenge relates to the reinforcement of the coherence among all these initiatives. Although European countries engage actively with the Gulf’s armed forces, be it for training activities or industrial projects, the previous section underlined how the bilateral framework can engender redundancies and prevent coherence among the initiatives pursued. Coordinating these bilateral activities does not fall under the mandate of the EU or NATO, so it can only be addressed on an ad-hoc basis among the relevant stakeholders. At the same time greater coherence does not mean merely coordinating European resources but also better understanding what the Gulf’s armed forces are looking for in terms of training activities and procurement policies and what the added value of European countries can be, vis-à-vis other international partners such as the US, Russia or China.

2.1. The added value of European military education to GCC partners

In the field of training, Europeans could adapt their programmes in order not to automatically duplicate their own national military education systems, but rather to emphasise the most relevant aspects for their GCC counterparts: the existence of similar goals in terms of force structure and a common need for interoperability skills. This revision of the European approach towards military training in the Peninsula relates to the reforms that the Gulf’s armed forces have recently initiated for their education systems, in order to improve the professionalism and readiness of their troops. Among other examples, Qatar opened its new Joint Command and Staff College in 2013, followed a few months later by National Defence Colleges in the UAE and Oman. A year later, Bahrain established the Royal Command, Staff and National Defence College. The Saudi Armed Forces are also in the process of revamping their whole professional military education system, with a new defence university project that will eventually comprise several military colleges (for the different military services and from the tactical to the strategic levels). All these new institutions evidence how military education in the Gulf is changing to align its goals better to those of their political leaders: as Gulf countries become regional powers. Gulf states are engaging in military operations on their own, such as in Yemen or deploying forces to the Horn of Africa, underlining the need to strengthen the skills of the national security elites. To date, Gulf

Governments rely primarily on US military expertise, provided to Gulf military schools either through government-to-government programmes or through the direct hiring of ex-US officers.

This reliance on US military trainers can be explained by the tendency of Gulf decision-makers to apply a benchmarking approach to their education programmes: they select the military educational approach that is considered the “best practice” and assume it will yield lessons for their own countries, regardless of the specificities of the two cases. But although the US has undeniably one of the most advanced professional military education systems, its curricula are tailored to American needs, meaning those of a great power that do not match those of the Gulf states. For instance, a former American instructor to one of the Saudi military colleges explained how he used to teach courses that were directly taken off the shelves from the US schools, despite the fact that it provided irrelevant lessons in the Saudi context.31

Given their regional priorities and their modest force structures, GCC militaries could benefit just as much from the experience of European countries, whose armed forces are closer in terms of scale than those of the US. The French-Emirati project to design a course on maritime security for naval officers is a case in point. The UAE, as well as its Gulf neighbours, could benefit from the experience of not only the French Navy but its Italian and Spanish counterparts, whose force structures and objectives are closer to those of the GCC’s navies than those of the US Navy.

In addition to the relevance of European military structures for the Gulf’s armed forces, European training programmes put a stronger emphasis on interoperability, compared to the US curricula.32 In fact, demands for interoperability have become a significant challenge to the Gulf’s armed forces for several years. Be it through the participation of Emirati and Qatari air forces in the NATO Operation Unified Protector in 2011 or the coordination among the forces of the nine members of the Saudi-coalition in Yemen since 2015, Gulf officers have directly experienced the importance of interoperability. On this particular issue, Gulf-European cooperation could also involve coordination with NATO programmes, in particular the ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait. The NATO experience of interoperability and the institutionalisation of that interoperability through the

“GCC militaries could benefit just as much from the experience of European countries, whose armed forces are closer in terms of scale than those of the US.”
application of common processes, standards, and a overall common strategic culture, is unique. In this context, GCC militaries could benefit from the programmes developed at the NATO School in Oberammergau (Germany) and the NATO Defense College in Rome (Italy). Both institutions play primary roles in cultivating the spirit of interoperability through the implementation of table-top crisis exercises and other educational activities that prioritise the international consensus among the participants.33

2.2. Supporting the growth of the Gulf’s defence industries

Industrial cooperation is another domain where European companies should not only better coordinate their efforts but also tailor their offers to match the needs and aspirations of Gulf governments. This is particularly relevant given the priority being placed on strengthening indigenous capabilities across the Peninsula. As of today, the Gulf’s armed forces rely heavily on imports and these represent approximately one-fifth of global arms imports. The “localisation” of Gulf military production has long been in the air. Starting in the 1980s foreign arms sales to the Arabian Peninsula usually included so-called “offset clauses”, pledges that implied the improvement of local know-how via the creation of joint ventures between the foreign supplier and a national entity, in order, eventually, to enable knowledge transfer.34

However, past efforts proved insufficient to decrease the over-reliance of the Gulf’s armed forces on foreign industries. As a result, several GCC states recently announced new reforms to reorganise their defence industries in a way that will more effectively implement the objective of localisation. In 2019, the UAE launched Edge, a government-owned company that has integrated more than 25 local companies (among the most significant ones Nimr, AMMROC, and Abu Dhabi Ship Building), as well as entities like the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC)35 and Tawazun Holding. The creation of Edge reflects the growing ambitions of Abu Dhabi in the defence industrial field, as companies like AMMROC and Abu Dhabi Ship Building have demonstrated in past years their abilities to turn from mere maintenance and repair services to the construction of their own platforms, such as helicopters and corvettes.36

Saudi Arabia is following a similar trajectory with the creation of the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) in May 2017. The new entity is meant to achieve the goal set by Saudi Vision 2030 to “localize more than 50% of the kingdom’s military spending by 2030” and to become one of the “top 25 military industries” around that same time horizon.37 Likewise, Qatar has developed its own strategy with the establishment of Barzan Holdings in 2018, with the aim of helping “Qatar achieve self-sufficiency”38. As these new initiatives are still in their early stages, the focus has been mostly on rearranging the governance of the Gulf’s national defence industries and the development of companies able to compete in international markets through mergers or acquisitions (e.g. Qatar established Barzan Aeronautical in the US while EDIC bought the French ammunition manufacturer Manurhin).

35 The Emirates Defence Industries Company was already the result in 2014 of an integration of sixteen small firms that was presided over by the former CEO of Thales Group.
For the moment, these revived aspirations of Gulf countries towards local defence industries have implications mostly for niche capabilities. The development of the UAE defence industry – the most advanced so far in the Peninsula – indicates that the Gulf states are unlikely to replace Western major companies on high-end systems such as fighter jets or frigates, but they do intend to develop specific skills that could allow them to achieve self-sufficiency in some domains and maybe even compete on these segments of the global arms markets. This could include platforms such as naval ships for coastal defence, armoured vehicles for stabilisation operations or unmanned aerial vehicles for surveillance and close air support missions, as well as artificial intelligence and cybersecurity technologies.

In this context greater exchanges between Gulf and European counterparts in these specific sectors are needed. Even though European companies will probably remain important suppliers for the Gulf countries, the lack of coordination between political and industrial stakeholders may leave them less competitive than their American counterparts in addressing the new aspirations of their Gulf partners. US defence companies and the US Department of Defense usually work with the GCC states through the framework of “foreign military sales” (FMS) that involves government-to-government supervision of the industrial programmes. The FMS environment offers a useful instrument for policymakers to coordinate between the skills and the needs of the three main stakeholders: the US government, the US industry and the Gulf state. Strengthening the coordination between European companies and governments on the one hand, and their Gulf partners on the other, would require the development of similar FMS-like frameworks. The EU and the European Defence Agency may represent the most credible stakeholders to lead that effort.

An initiative like this would involve a long institutional process. This is why, as a first step, the topic of supporting defence industries could be added to the agenda of the EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification. This initiative, funded by the EU since 2018, is designed to “contribute to stronger EU-GCC relations by supporting the GCC countries’ ongoing process of economic diversification away from hydrocarbon-dependent sectors.” To achieve this the Dialogue aims to enhance the business climate between European and Gulf private and public partners through workshops and regular studies. The Dialogue represents an ideal platform to

“European companies, alongside their governments, could support the Gulf’s efforts towards the building of indigenous defence industries.”
initiate discussions on the specific domains (e.g., UAVs, coastal defence and armoured vehicles) in which European companies, alongside their governments, could support the Gulf’s efforts towards the building of indigenous defence industries. Obviously, in the post-Brexit context, it should also include the UK in such discussions.

3. Building a Gulf-European strategic dialogue

If military training and industrial projects discussed in the previous section touched on the operational or technical aspects of defence cooperation, there are several critical issues at the strategic level in which both sides share common interests. Ultimately, developing the third pillar of Europe-Gulf defence cooperation – namely strategic consultations – is the most efficient way to strengthen the relationship between both sides. This is why this last section explores three areas that could pave the way for a greater Gulf-European strategic dialogue: maritime security from Bab el-Mandeb to the Strait of Hormuz; joint contribution to the security architecture in the Sahel; and coordinated security assistance to Middle Eastern countries, namely Iraq and Lebanon.

3.1. Maritime security from Bab el-Mandeb to the Strait of Hormuz

European and Gulf concerns towards maritime security in the area from the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa all the way up to the Strait of Hormuz significantly increased since the time the EU launched its naval Operation Atalanta in December 2008, with the aim of responding to the growth of Somalia-based piracy. After 2015, the conflict in Yemen spilled over into the Red Sea, with Houthi fighters firing missiles at merchant vessels and coalition ships. Meanwhile, tensions in the Strait of Hormuz returned to the news headlines with the repeated attacks on oil tankers in the spring of 2019, first in May off the coast of Fujairah, UAE and then a month later in the Gulf of Oman. As previously mentioned, this triggered the launching of the Western-led operations “Sentinel” and “Agénor”.

Both European and Gulf navies operate with limited resources. The GCC militaries traditionally focus their human resources on ground and air forces, with sailors representing the smallest portion among the services. In terms of capabilities, the Gulf navies rely mostly on patrol and coastal defence ships, with only the Saudi Navy operating frigates while the others have corvettes of varying size. If this does not jeopardise their ability to protect their maritime zones of sovereignty, it does constrain their power projection capabilities and as a result it prevents them

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41 Based on the statistics available in IISS’ Military Balance, in 2020, the Saudi Navy, the biggest service in the Gulf, comprises 13500 sailors, which roughly represents less than 6% of the total armed forces in the Kingdom. The proportion is not much higher in other GCC states: 11% in Kuwait; 15% in Qatar; 9.8% in Oman; 8.5% in Bahrain; 3.9% in the UAE.
from playing a more active role in terms of maritime diplomacy at the regional level. Meanwhile, European naval forces are still able to deploy ships and personnel in the Gulf, as evidenced by their support to both “Agénor” and “Sentinel” operations. But this may be jeopardised by the economic fallouts of the COVID-19 crisis and the likely impact on defence expenditures. Tighter financial scrutiny in European countries could force some of these navies to revise their priorities and to reduce the scope of their international engagements.

In fact, these constraints are the very reason why the Europeans and their Gulf partners should work together and use maritime operations such as Atalanta and Agénor to build closer European-Gulf dialogue on maritime security. This would not only serve to compare threat assessments but also to discuss ways to design and enforce cooperative mechanisms in the area (e.g. a code of conduct at sea, a common structure dedicated to maritime surveillance or the preparation of joint naval operations).

The format of such exchanges might initially be defined on an ad-hoc basis, as Operation Agénor is technically not an EU mission. The emphasis should rather be on the fight against non-state naval attacks – whether coming from piracy groups in the Horn of Africa or from Yemeni militias – than on countering Iranian naval activities. Opting for a confrontational approach that places Iran at the centre of Europe’s maritime security strategy in the Gulf is unlikely to mobilise decision-makers in Brussels. But orienting the dialogue towards addressing the threats of non-state actors is both a cautious way for the Europeans to avoid getting trapped in regional competition and is also an opportunity for European navies to share with Gulf counterparts the lessons learned from a decade of the Atalanta operation. Moreover, such a dialogue could serve as a vehicle to support other European goals in its military cooperation with the Gulf at the level of maritime training or naval procurement, as discussed above.

3.2. Gulf-European contribution to the security architecture in the Sahel

In addition to their increased influence in the Horn of Africa, Gulf countries, more particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have signalled their intention to help consolidate the security architecture in the Sahel. Like their European partners, Gulf officials increasingly see the fight against Islamic militias in the area as a key to
preventing a broader spill over.⁴² At the regional level, the creation of the G5 Sahel in 2014 has been one of the key initiatives in strengthening the security architecture, in particular the establishment of an integrated military structure, the G5 Sahel Joint Force.⁴³ Europeans are directly involved in the strengthening of the local forces. France deploys 5,000 soldiers to the Sahel, the EU established a training mission in Mali and has sent special forces as part of Task Force Takuba conducting counter-terrorism missions.

In December 2017 both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi announced their support for the build-up of the G5 Sahel Joint Force with major financial pledges: Saudi Arabia promised €100 million (approximately the same amount as the EU) and the UAE declared it would provide €30 million.⁴⁴ Given the level of this financial support and the EU’s active role in supporting military forces in the Sahel, there is a growing need to coordinate European and Gulf initiatives, as they both aim to stabilise the Sahel through the reinforcement of the G5 joint force and the national armed forces.

Admittedly, African countries have been struggling with the development of the G5 Joint Force. The initiative was undermined by competing national agendas, significant discrepancies in the readiness of the five national armed forces involved and the limited experience in interoperability. These challenges have been aggravated by the worrying growth of terrorist attacks, in particular in the area of the so-called “three borders” – between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Politics has undermined the whole process, as the G5 Sahel was quickly tainted by the perceived French influence behind the project, which echoed accusations of French neo-colonial ambitions in African capitals. The military coup in Mali in July 2020 further underlined the volatility of the political environment and the difficulty for European and Gulf countries to build stable ties with local decision-makers. One of the consequences of the coup was the suspension of the EU’s training mission to Mali until further notice.

The challenges facing Europeans in the Sahel are made even more difficult as the outgoing US administration expressed its growing reluctance to engage in African security issues, in particular in Western Africa.⁴⁵ European countries will have difficulties bearing the burden of supporting local partners and this is why Gulf countries could play a key role, diplomatically and financially, to help the consolidation of the G5 Joint Force. The UAE and Saudi Arabia enjoy strong ties with the governments of Mauritania and Chad, while their diplomatic and economic relations with Burkina Faso and Mali have been growing. The G5 Sahel Defense College that provides training for the five national militaries is based in Mauritania on a military campus financed by the UAE and named the Mohamed bin Zayed College in honour of Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince. In this context a European-Gulf strategic dialogue on the Sahel could focus on the ways to coordinate financial and operational support to the G5 countries by looking not only at the institutional governance aspects but also at the concrete military needs of the five African countries, in terms of capabilities, training and interoperability.

### 3.3. Gulf-European joint contributions to security assistance in the Middle East

For Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, the COVID-19 crisis only added to the tremendous challenges that their governments were already facing. The explosion at Beirut Port on 4 August 2020 was a culminating point after months of demonstrations, combined with a financial crisis that saw the near-collapse of the Lebanese currency. French President Emmanuel

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⁴³ The G5 Sahel is composed of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.
Macron quickly took the initiative to mobilise the international community in support of the recovery of Lebanon. Following the explosion, Macron visited Beirut twice in less than a month. In exchange for the financial support of the IMF to Lebanon, the Lebanese government is required to comply with a set of conditions that relate to good governance, mostly in terms of public expenditures. The ability of the political elite in Beirut to implement the road map supported by France remains questionable, as evidenced by the failed attempt of Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Adib to form a new government in September. This failure, caused primarily by the opposition of Hezbollah, underlines that in the long term, the stabilisation of Lebanon and the restoration of state authority requires addressing the issue of Hezbollah’s military power vis-à-vis the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

The military conundrum within Lebanon is well-known. The LAF have long struggled to impose its authority vis-à-vis Hezbollah, which has maintained its own forces and capabilities, predominantly in the south of the country. Under these circumstances, financial and military support for the LAF was believed to rebalance this internal competition towards state institutions. In 2017, the operational successes recorded by the LAF in several cross-border clashes with Syria-based Islamic groups reflected not only the professionalism of the Lebanese soldiers but also the existence of a viable option for Lebanon’s security, which may not be Hezbollah. Building on the new momentum brought about by the Beirut explosion last August, European countries, in particular France, should call on Gulf partners to recommit to Lebanon and in particular to convince Saudi Arabia to revise its past decision of 2016 to halt its support for the LAF. Given the apparent reluctance of the current US administration to play a leading role on the situation in Lebanon, the Europeans should take the lead and create the conditions for trilateral cooperation between Gulf, European and Lebanese armed forces.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the government of Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi has been engaged in a fierce struggle to regain full control of its security forces vis-à-vis Iran-backed militias. The GCC states have favourably welcomed this new orientation in Baghdad. For instance, in June 2020 the UAE’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation issued a statement denouncing “the Turkish and Iranian bombing of areas in northern Iraq and their violation of the sovereignty of a friendly Arab country”. Strengthening and anchoring the future for Iraqi armed forces in the Arab world rather than under Iranian control and influence is a goal shared by both European and Gulf partners. NATO resumed its training of Iraqi forces only a year before the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. Originally established in 2004 after the US invasion, the mission had trained about 15,000 Iraqi officers before the programme was suspended following the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq. NATO provided occasional training of Iraqi officials through the deployment of advisors in Baghdad and the attendance of Iraqi officers at NATO courses in Germany or Italy. The new training mission has a more ambitious scope, with 500 advisors permanently stationed inside the country. Unfortunately, for the moment, the pandemic has put an end to these efforts – advisors have been sent back home as a result – but the resumption of the NATO mission, pending the health situation, could play a crucial role in supporting the goal of reinserting Iraq into the regional security architecture. Baghdad could be part of a NATO dialogue with its Gulf partners and more specifically it could be worth exploring the possibility of Iraq joining the ICI and using the partnership as a tool to cement security cooperation between Baghdad and its Gulf neighbours.

49 The official ICI document of 2004 does not specify geographic limits and states that “based on the principle of inclusiveness, the initiative could be opened to all interested countries in the region who subscribe to the aim and content of this initiative [...]. Each interested country would be considered by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis and on its own merit”.
Overall, a European-Gulf strategic dialogue could build on the common interests of both sides: to support regional stability, be it in the maritime area between Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz, the Sahel or in Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon and Iraq whose state institutions face crucial challenges to their ability to exercise their authority. Such consultations would not only improve the diplomatic relations between European and Gulf partners, but would also, more importantly, provide a framework to coordinate efforts related to the two other pillars of defence cooperation - military training and industrial cooperation.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the key issues that make European-Gulf defence cooperation more relevant than is usually assumed. In the first section, the overview of both bilateral and multilateral engagements evidenced the diversity and the density of the military exchanges between both regions. European armed forces, in particular those of the UK and France, have been involved in the training of their Gulf partners for decades, while European defence industries remain among the most important suppliers of weapons systems and air and naval platforms in the Arabian Peninsula. But with the plurality of these strategic relationships comes the challenge to their overall cohesion, arguably the biggest challenge for both sides.

Instead of speculating on the addition of a new institutional layer to centralise the governance of these partnerships, the second section of the paper explored the ways to strengthen the ties between the Europeans and their Gulf partners with regards to two of the pillars of their defence cooperation. It is emphasised how the training provided by the European militaries in the region could be adapted to the contemporary needs of the Gulf’s armed forces. Meanwhile, in light of the new impetus among the GCC states for the “localisation” of their defence industries, European companies should review the ways in which they can offer their support in that process. Finally, the third section recommended building on these efforts in order to support strategic consultations between both sides. With that aim in mind, a possible agenda was detailed for a European-Gulf strategic dialogue that could place emphasis on three areas of cooperation – maritime security and joint security support to Sahel and Middle East partners.

Admittedly, neither side should “oversell” what it can offer to the other side or what it can accept. A European-Gulf defence partnership should not pretend to solve all the regional issues at stake – decision-makers on both sides have no illusions as to the others’ abilities for that matter. But a pragmatic approach that assigns clear and limited objectives – such as containing maritime threats, supporting the security architecture in the Sahel, or strengthening the capabilities of the security forces in Lebanon or Iraq – could provide a constructive road map. Furthermore, given the nature of these security issues, responses demand a flexible approach regarding the institutions involved – national governments, NATO, the EU, and the GCC countries. In the end finding the right balance between multilateral and bilateral engagements should be defined by the best way to address common challenges.
About the Author

Jean-Loup Samaan is a research affiliate of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. His research focuses on Middle Eastern strategic affairs, in particular Israel-Hezbollah conflict and the evolution of the Gulf security system. He has authored four books and several articles for various international academic and policy journals such as Survival, Parameters, Orbis, Comparative Strategy, and Politique Étrangère. Dr. Samaan holds a Ph.D. in political science (2009) from the University of Paris, La Sorbonne as well as an accreditation to supervise research (2017) from the doctoral school of Sciences Po, Paris. His publications are available at https://jeanloupsamaan.com.